MODERN PROBLEMS OF THE CRAFT

Answers to Some Questions By Herbert Hungerford, Author of Our Ancient Fraternity and Present Day Problems

SINCE proposing the adoption of a program of Popular Masonic education-that is a program designed particularly to appeal to the interests of the rank and file of ordinary Masons-as a solution for many of the present day problems of our Order, a good many challenging questions have been put up to me in person and by letters from brethren. Some of these questions, which I now propose to face, even though I may not be able to give adequate answers to all of them, doubtless, are the questions arising in the minds of many of our members when they confront the problems that must be solved and the tasks that must be undertaken if Freemasonry is to meet the challenge of the changing conditions in our day and age.

1-Since Membership in the Order is Increasing Every Year, Why Do You Insist That Anything is Wrong?

I do not base my opinion that Freemasonry has shifted to a wrong direction, simply because the rate of increase in membership has declined every year for at least five years. I am quite willing to concede that our growth at one period may have been too rapid for the health of the Order. Frankly, I am far more concerned about the quantitative than the quantitative extension of Freemasonry. It is the decline in the quality of membership and, particularly, the cheapening of the quality of Masonic activities that seems to me apparent everywhere that caused the protest I have voiced.

2-Is Not the Real Spirit of Freemasonry Manifested More in the Lives of Its Members Than in Their Attendance at Meetings?

Certainly; yet this admission does not alter the criticism of a Lodge for its failure to provide a program that will attract more than five or ten per cent of its members. No one can deny that many good men and Masons seldom attend their Lodge. I claim that the Lodge is at fault if it does not provide programs which appeal to every good Mason.

3-Isn't Masonry Losing Ground for the Same Reason That the Church is?

If this question means to imply that folks are no longer interested in the cultural or spiritual values of life, my own observation of the widespread interest in various other cultural activities appears to give a negative answer. But, if the purport of the inquiry is that many churches as well as many Lodges have failed to adjust their programs to keep in tune with the new cultural key- note of our times, I think it must be admitted that this surely is one cause of the decline of both institutions.

4-Isn't Our Present Masonic Problem Due Chiefly to the Fact That During the Period When the Order Grew so Rapidly Too Many Members of Low Grade Intelligence Were Admitted?

This is the classic criticism of the high-brow. The question implies that Masonry is, or should be, an aristocratic instead of a democratic institution. This is a suggestion of intellectual snobbery, which seems to me false to every ideal and contrary to every precept of our Order. The appeal of our ancient fraternity always has been and, I trust, ever will be to the common citizen, the average man.

5-Don't You Think the Big Trouble With Our Lodges Comes From Too Many Square Clubs and Other Auxiliary Organizations?

No, I do not think this is necessarily so. Doubtless some "joiners" simply use the Lodge as an entrance to some of the modern auxiliaries of Freemasonry. But, if our lodges were fulfilling their true mission and providing a distinctive cultural program that could not be obtained elsewhere, every society and fraternity connected with the fundamental organization would help rather than hinder its growth and influence.

6-Don't You Think That the Opposition of Certain Religious Denominations Has Been Detrimental to Freemasonry?

Quite the contrary. In my opinion, the greatest achievement of Freemasonry has been its firm stand against the twin evils of bigotry and intolerance. I am firmly persuaded that this has drawn more into the Order than the forces of bigotry have kept out of it. Is there anyone in these days who cannot read in the signs of the times the doom of bigotry and the ultimate triumph of the truth and light which our great institution has so long upheld?

7 Haven't You Found That the Major Fault of Masonry is Too Much Masonic Polities?

Well, I agree with Brother Cyrus Field Williard, who pointed out in THE BUILDER last month that the sacerdotal class in all ages, and in all bodies, even Grand Lodges, have always sought to keep the multitude in ignorance that their own schemes might be forwarded." So, I must admit quite frankly that some of the political activities of our "big guns" have not helped much to raise the ideals or advance the interests of the Craft. But, I also agree most emphatically with Brother Willard, that in our fraternal democracy, the rank and file are the real rulers, so if we make a genuine demand for our ancient "birthright" all good Masonic politicians will be quick to aid us in procuring all the educational advantages we may require.

8-Don't You Realize That the Worst Evil in Our Lodges is the Continuous Money Raising Campaigns, So That One Can Not Attend a Meeting Without Being Tackled for a Contribution or a Subscription, Which Makes Such a Steady Drain Upon the Pocketbook That Some Star Away From Lodge in Order to Avoid These Constant Drives?

I do not deny that there is some excuse for this complaint because, frankly, it seems to me that some of our fund-raising drives would require a considerable stretch of the imagination to be classed as charity. But, I do not think true-spirited Masons ever will complain about or dodge the appeals of true Masonic charity. Our trouble, I believe, lies in the failure of our present programs to fully impress the teachings of our fraternity and to inculcate the true Masonic spirit in all brethren admitted to our fellowship.

9-Getting Right Down to Brass Tacks, Hasn't Masonry Slumped for the Same Reason That All Cultural Activities Are Going Backwards?

Since I am unable to agree with the assumption that all cultural activities in this country are going backwards, of course, I cannot admit that this-whatever it may be - is a cause of the slacking of the progress of our fraternity. In the wide-spread sale of thoughtful books, such as Dr. Durant's Story of Philosophy for example; in the eager interest that so many people manifest in many new cultural movements such as The Humanistic Society and in the tribute that the whole world now pays to its men of genius, before they die; as in the recent celebrations in honor of Thomas A. Edison and Dr. John Dewey; all these and other present day activities seem to me to be definite indications of a genuine revival of cultural interest.

10-Why Waste Energies in Chasing the Delusion That It Is Possible to Interest the Rank and File of Our Craft in Anything of an Educational Character? Why Not Be Content to Concentrate Your Educational Efforts in Behalf of the Small Minority of Really Intelligent Members?

As I have already tried to answer this question several times, perhaps it will suffice to remind readers of what he Great Teacher said when He was rebuked for His association with and His interest in the "low-brows" of his day. "The Son of Man came not to call the righteous but sinners unto repentance." The real students and scholars of our Craft do not need more Masonic education.

11- if Masonic Education Is Such a Good Thing, Why Is There so Much Difficulty in Putting it Across?

One way of treating this would be to label it Foolish question No. 9,733,562. A Yankee method of answering it is to ask - Can you name anything really worth while that did not require great pains and effort to establish?

12 - Why Do You Talk as Though Masonic Education Were a Newly Discovered Remedy for Our Ills, When Others Have Been Preaching the virtues of This Panacea for Years?

The answer to this simply is that I have never advocated the virtues of Masonic education either as a panacea or a novelty. Always I have tried to convey my belief that the shifting of our emphasis, so as to devote more attention to the educational and cultural features of our Masonic program, instead of an innovation or a novelty simply would be getting back to the principle on which our great Institution was originally established.

13-One of Our Well Informed Brothers Recently Gave Us an Address on Masonic Education Which Put Most of Our Members Asleep. Why Do You Insist on Inflicting More of This Sort of Thing Upon Us?

The only answer to this is that old-time classic, "You can't drive a nail with a sponge, no matter how hard you may soak it."

14 - We Started a Study Club Which Petered Out After a Few Meetings. Why Should we Try it Again?

I am not convinced that it is the best way to begin a Masonic educational program by starting a Study Club. Certainly there are many other things that may be done to introduce more educational features into Lodge programs. The chief secret of success in conducting a Study Club is having an enthusiastic

and tactful leader. This type of leadership can make a success of any group activity. But it is not always easy to discover or develop such leadership in Lodge work. Yet it can be done.

15 - Our Lodge of Three Hundred Members Is Finding Difficulty in Discovering Good Men to Fill Our Chairs. Can You Help us?

What a confession of weakness this is of the present practice in a modern Lodge! If it were an exceptional situation it would not seem so pitiful; but my observation convinces me that it is a frequent problem of many Lodges. It seems to me that the cause of this serious shortcoming can be due only to one condition. The Lodge program has been so lacking in many of the fundamental educational teachings of the fraternity that it has failed to inspire and train even a paltry percentage of its own membership with any of the true ideals and interests of our Order which should make men eager for an opportunity to serve, and at the same time become duly informed in Masonic principles and inspired with the high ideals of the spirit of Freemasonry so as to assure their competence in filling any chair of their Lodge.

16 - Since Our Fraternity Is Already Staggering Under the Burden of Too Many Side-Line Societies, Why Do You Propose Another Association to Carry on Your Particular Plan of Masonic Education?

In suggesting that those of us who are mutually interested in this proposition of endeavoring to devise and develop a program that will appeal to ordinary Masons and interest them in some sort of educational or cultural activities in our Order, should adopt such a title as "The Loyal Order of Builders," I had no notion of suggesting a new society, but merely a method of co-operation in the development of our program. We do not need another organization, but we do need some sort of a group heading under which we may formulate our plans and exchange experiences in carrying on the work we are undertaking. It seems to me that The Loyal Order of Builders is a proper and significant title for us to adopt as kind of a working slogan, so I shall be glad to hear from everyone interested in the aims we have been describing and the program we are trying to develop. Bear in mind that our great purpose is not to start something new, but rather a plan to get back to first principles in our Masonic programs, yet adopting modern ideas and instrumentalities in furthering these principles.

Address your letters of comment, criticism, inquiry or enlistment in this effort to Herbert Hungerford, The Loyal Order of Builders, Scarsdale, N. Y.

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